

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Onslaught of the Druid Girls

Date of first publication: 1941

Author: Ray Cummings (1887?-1957)

Date first posted: June 14 2013

Date last updated: June 14 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130624

This eBook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mary Meehan & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

Onslaught of the DRUID GIRLS

by RAY CUMMINGS

Lee Blaine went to find Earth's second moon, and found also a lovely girl in dire, mysterious danger.

FANTASTIC ADVENTURES

VOL. 3, NO. 4

June, 1941

The scream of the meteor, flaming its way down through the atmosphere, still echoed over the quiet Wisconsin countryside.

"Robert ... Robert," came an anxious, startled voice penetrating the lonely observatory from the staircase that led down to the little cottage itself, "What has happened? What was that awful noise?"

When Lee Blaine reached Earth's second moon, he found a tangle of mystery. Who were the Nonites? What danger menaced Aurita and her Druid girls?

"A meteor, only a giant meteor," Dr. Robert Blaine's old voice called down. "It landed close, Mary, but everything's all right, I'm sure ..."

He turned and peered through the gloom of the observatory, toward the iron stairway that led to a tiny walk circling the room. Up there were a few small, shuttered windows. From them he might be able to see something ...

Slowly, because his old joints creaked with movement, he walked around the telescope that took up most of the center of the floor. Halfway up the stairway to the tiny walk he heard footsteps behind him. Light footsteps, sure and dainty still, even though the woman who had come into the laboratory was white-haired and wrinkled with the years that make a grandmother so sweet.

"I'm coming up to see too, Robert," she said. "Besides, you know you shouldn't be climbing around here. You're liable to fall ..."

"Now, Mary," he protested. "Just because you're my wife—these fifty years past—you don't have to treat me like those babies who've grown up and gotten out of your tender clutches. The years have meant less to you, because I've been kind ..."

"Yes, Robert, and haven't I always been a good wife and given as much as I received? So now, it is my shoulder you must lean on, when you climb."

He waited on the stairway until she was at his side. Then he reached out and kissed her fondly.

"It's been a good life, hasn't it, Mary? A little lonely, but ..." he paused as he saw the wistful look that flashed for a moment into her eyes.

"It would have been nice if Lee were here to help us both," she said. "He would take us to the meteor ..." She stopped suddenly—

"Oh, Robert, do you think...?"

"You mean—a message from him? The meteor...?" Dr. Blaine frowned. "He promised he'd communicate—if he could—some way, especially if he could justify my theory ..."

"Robert," she said swiftly, tremulously, "I have such a strange feeling. Almost as if our grandson were near ..."

Together they climbed the stairway and opened a shuttered window to the stars. Outside, it was night, and the sky was a blue vault of jeweled treasure.

"It landed on this side, to the east," said Robert Blaine, peering with his old eyes into the night.

"Robert! Over there! A red glow—and smoke. The grass is smouldering in the roadside near the barn ..." Mary's voice was youthful with excitement, and her still-beautiful face was tense.

Blaine peered in the direction she pointed, past the lacy cuff of her long-sleeved dress.

"Yes," he nodded slowly. "It landed there."

"A message—from Lee!" she exclaimed.

He laid a hand on her arm.

"Now, Mary, don't build up your hopes. Don't jump to conclusions. That's not the good astronomer I've taught you to be."

"I'm not an astronomer tonight," she said with a catch in her voice. "I'm a lonely old lady, with a woman's intuition, and a wish to hear from ... from Ethel's boy. When you lose your own children, a grandson seems to become even more dear."

Robert Blaine put an arm around her shoulder.

"I know, Mary," he whispered. "I loved Lee, too, and that night he went away, out into space, saying he would prove I was right about the second moon and restore my good name in astronomy, I wished I'd never discovered Zonara. Always was an impetuous lad, was Lee. Never gave a thought to the fact that he was gambling his life for something so trivial as his grandfather's integrity as an astronomer ..."

"It wasn't trivial to him ... and besides, Lee knew what he was doing. He believed in space travel. I know he's alive, that he didn't die out there in the void." Mary's voice took on a sure tone. "That meteor out there; we've got to dig it up ..."



But it was late afternoon of the next day before they got the meteorite out of the ground where it had buried itself eight feet beneath the surface. Henry, the hired man, had to dig a trench about it, then drag it out with the station wagon.

And then, when they got it into the basement, a welder had to come out from town to cut into its hard metal with a torch.

It had been, roughly, about three feet long and eight inches in diameter. Scarred and pitted, it was, from its fiery flight through the atmosphere. But even from the start, it had been obvious that it was no ordinary meteor.

"It's from Lee," Mary Blaine said positively many times.

And when it finally fell in two halves, her woman's intuition was found to be correct. For the shell contained a variety of objects. There was a manuscript, on strange buff-colored material that wasn't paper; a sheaf of maps, charts, and computations; a folded note; and strangest of all, two great diamond-like jewels that sparkled and shone brilliantly as the light fell on them.

"Diamonds!" gasped Mary. "Bigger than any on Earth ..."

"No," said Dr. Blaine slowly. "Not diamonds. Just some kind of crystal. But they are beautiful, aren't they?"

He picked one up and walked to the light to examine it. He peered into his carved facets, and an exclamation burst from him.

"Mary, look...!" he began.

"Robert," she interrupted him. "This note. From Lee. He's safe, and happy—but," her voice fell, "he says he has no means to come home ..." her voice trailed away. "Oh, Lee, my darling ..." she murmured.

Blaine took the note from her and read:

"Dear Mary and Bob (Lee had always called them that):" it began. "I am on Zonara, and I have proved all your theories. Charted proof is included in this shell, and the story of my adventures here. I am safe, but I cannot return to Earth. My machine is wrecked. I am happy, though, and would not leave if I could. If you will look into the crystals, you will find out why. Love to you both. Lee."

Dr. Blaine lifted the crystal he still held in his hand and stared once more into it.

"Look, Mary," he said gently. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Wonder in her eyes, Mary Blaine peered into the crystal, and a cry came from her old lips, as she saw, deep in its flashing depths, the shimmering image of a girl.

A tiny figure at first; but soon the image seemed to grow until Mary Blaine almost imagined she were looking through a window at the elfinly beautiful face of a lovely girl who stared out at her.

Long hair seemed to float in the wind, and deep blue eyes, filled with earnestness, and yet with a laughing joyousness, looked into hers.

"She's perfect!" breathed Mary. "Oh, Lee, if she's yours, then you *are* happy there on Zonara!"

"Look here," said Robert Blaine, handing her the other crystal. "It's ... Lee!"

Looking out of the crystal she saw the handsome features of Lee Blaine, although an older, more manly Lee Blaine than the youth who had gone so bravely and so foolishly into space three years before. He seemed tall and strong and fully developed. His cheeks were tanned, and he was healthy and smiling and happy. It was almost as if he were speaking, so real was the image confined in the depths of the mysterious crystal.

"So much better than our pictures," breathed Mary. "He cannot ever be far from us while we have these ..."

"Come, Mary," said Blaine. "Let's go upstairs and sit before the fire. You can read the manuscript. Your eyes are better than mine. I've spent too many long hours at the telescope ..."

He put an arm around her shoulder and they went upstairs. There they sat before the fireplace and read the manuscript of Lee Blaine, who went to Earth's second moon to prove that it really existed; to vindicate his grandfather, Dr. Robert Blaine, who listened now to his wife's clear, quiet voice reading the story on the curious buff sheets that had crossed the void from 440,000 miles away in space.

And this is the story of Lee Blaine and of Aurita, the Druid Girl of Zonara:

CHAPTER I

A World Beyond the Moon

I am addressing this, mathematically as close as I can, to my grandfather and grandmother, Dr. and Mrs. Robert Blaine, of Delavan, Wisconsin. However, if it should not reach them, but someone else, I will introduce myself.

I am an orphan. My name, Lee Blaine. I was twelve when my father and mother were killed in a laboratory explosion during a research experiment on atomic power. After their death, my grandfather devoted himself to me and my scientific training.

At twenty I was a technical assistant to a famous Chicago inventor. He and I were working secretly on artificial gravity control. He was a believer in doing, not talking, so he insisted on secrecy. And he had been successful. We had, in the laboratory, a little twenty-foot, one-man space-rocket, if you want to call it that. A finned, tubular steelite cylinder some six feet in diameter. As yet untested, but we were sure it would operate correctly.

Some of the technical details were mine, but I feel that it is not fitting for me to give them here. The anti-gravity force in the alumite-iridium alloys was the work of the inventor. Yet, with a humorous smile on his thin lips—he was already sixty years old—he named the machine for me. He called it the Blaine-rocket.

So much for me, Lee Blaine, and the original Blaine-rocket. You who read this may perhaps know far more details than that, anyway ...

I must get on to the factors that ultimately led to my first—and last—voyage into space in that Blaine-rocket.

It all began when I got a letter from grandfather Blaine. It said simply, among the other homey things that a letter from the "folks" always brings, that grandfather's theory of a second moon had been rejected by the Astronomical Society.

But the papers said more. Far more! They picked up the story, and overnight, because of the strange sense of humor of a conscienceless newspaper writer, it became the laugh of the nation. "*Astronomer Moonstruck!*" ran the headlines. "*Sees Double!*"

For days the nation laughed at the poor old man in Wisconsin who claimed to have discovered a new moon, a second satellite of Earth, out beyond the orbit of Luna, some 440,000 miles away. No other astronomers would support the theory. None had observed it. Not even Grandfather had *seen* it. But he could prove its existence to his own satisfaction. He had called it Zonara.^[1]

I myself believed there was a second moon. My own father had suspected its existence, when he had been helping Grandfather in his observations. A tiny asteroid, with perhaps a strange form of atmosphere incapable of reflecting sunlight, so that its small, dark object had not been visible in Earth telescopes. They had located it approximately, and remembering, I could recall some of their computations. I could point to the spot in the sky where it *should* be.

I believed in it so much that thinking of it, and of Grandfather's justification, one day when a test was to be made of the new Blaine-rocket, the inspiration came to me.

Ordinarily, my employer, the inventor, would have gone on the maiden voyage himself. But he was sixty; too old to withstand the rigors of such an experience. So he hired a "suicide-volunteer"—a professional hazard-man as they are called, to test our mechanism ...

My idea was simple. I defrauded that hazard-man of his job. The night before he was to make his flight, when all was in readiness, I sneaked to the take-off field, stepped into the Blaine-rocket, and blasted off!

A fool stunt? The thoughtless act of a youngster? Perhaps, but was it any more thoughtless than the "stunt" of a newspaper writer who made an old man the laughing stock of millions?

I think I need not detail that pioneer spaceflight now. Certainly it is not important to my narrative of explanation ... I was unconscious surely for the first half of the trip, with only my youth and strength saving me. Perhaps the hazard-man would not have fared so well.

The shock of the explosive take-off rendered me unconscious; I was well beyond the attraction of the Earth, perhaps being pulled by Zonara itself, when I recovered.

Then at last I could see my destination. I was still within the giant cone of the Earth's shadow, with the huge half-moon far to one side and now behind me, when slowly the drab, round disk of Zonara became visible. And then it was a monstrous, cloud-banked surface, filling all the Heavens under me as with retarded velocity I dropped down upon it.

I could see a forest along the edge of a lake; the lake itself winding about with mountain peaks off to one side. You may guess the pounding of my heart, my tense excitement as now, in the dim effulgence of the Zonara night, I came down under the cloud banks with the small, convex surface of the little world close beneath me. Dark little mountains, ragged with starlit metal spires; rivers and little lakes; and a vast, blue-black and brown forest, lying in patches ... dark, mysterious. And queerly ominous ...

I had the sudden feeling of menace, down there in the darkness of the forest surface. It was as though the aura of a strange fear down in its depths reached up at me ...



I crashed through the forest-top and smashed the little Blaine-rocket to the ground. Inexpert; and certainly with primitive mechanisms at my command. At all events, again I was knocked unconscious. For how long I do not know. Then at last I was dimly aware that I was smothering; that I must get out of the cylinder ...

Zonara!

My first awareness of it was that I was staggering out into darkness. The air was strangely heavy, choking so that my head reeled and sang with new violence. I felt myself sinking to a soft, mouldy ground. The lush smell of vegetation was in the night air. Weird gnarled shapes of trees were thick around me; clustering air-vines were like tangled ropes everywhere—vines with pods and great elephant-eared leaves.

A jungle primeval. I did not quite sink back into unconsciousness this time. I recall that over my head, far up, faint straggling starlight was visible. And then suddenly I tensed, struggling up on one elbow as I stared.

A little brown shape, white-limbed, was running up there through the trees along giant boughs. A girl! I gasped in utter amazement. A lovely girl, human, here on a tiny world that Earth and humankind didn't even suspect existed! It was incredible.

She was swinging down on the vines as she descended.

The crash of my landing of course had been obvious. I saw her, fifty feet over me, and to one side, grip a dangling rope-like vine. And as she swung free, her weight came with it in a great swaying arc. Her hair and her little draped brown garment fluttered. Then she lightly struck the ground, with her skilled motion so that she kept on at a run until she was beside me.

Her long hair, gold among the tangled vines and leaves, fell loosely from her head, with a night breeze rippling it like a cloak about her brown-clothed body—a single, simple little brown garment from shoulders to thighs, with her pink-white rounded limbs glistening in the starlight.

There was fear upon her as she gripped me. Fear perhaps of me—but it seemed not so much that as fear of something else. In the darkness here she was only a blob, murmuring vehement, unintelligible words, with her hands pulling frantically at my jacket.



CHAPTER II

A Fight—and Flight—in the Dark

I couldn't understand her words. But I could understand the frightened glances she cast over her shoulder, and the plea in her lovely almond eyes, eyes that were not Oriental, yet strangely exotic. She was afraid of something that pursued her—was begging me to save her from it. Begging me, who was also a stranger, but obviously less to be feared even though unknown, than whatever or whoever menaced her from the forest's gloomy depths.

Now I could hear a crashing, the sound of a body forcing its way through the tangled vines. Mirrored in her oval, girlish face; obvious in the quickening pulse in her slim, white throat; rising with the panting heave of her young breast, was added terror at the sound.

She uttered a low cry. Unmistakable. A cry for help.

I sucked in my breath. Whatever followed her, I would face it. It would be worth facing, for the chance to look further on her beauty, so weird, so fascinating ...

And I had to face it now; for into the tiny clearing burst ... a man! Not a fanciful monster, but simply a man. A great, brutal hulk of a man, his evil face cast in an enraged mask of desire and passion.

He stopped suddenly, as he saw me, but then, before I had a chance to do more than thrust the girl behind me, he threw himself forward again.

With bone-crushing force he smashed against me, and as I went down, youth that I was, I knew that I would be no match for his brute strength in the kind of battle he sought to wage. So I scrambled frantically, almost in panic, to roll away from his grasping arms, and to regain my feet.

Perhaps, to the girl, in that instant it appeared that I was afraid.

Afraid! Yes, I was. I had never fought like this before. I was used to boxing, in the gymnasium, sparring lightly. Here was an opponent who wasn't intent on getting exercise. He was intent on one thing only—killing me.

But when he came up again, rushing me, I did what I had always done in the gymnasium ring; I feinted, side-stepped, then swung from the balls of my feet ... with all the vigor of my one-hundred-seventy pounds in a punch for the first time in my life! And I connected. Squarely on the point of his bearded chin my knuckles landed—and pain shot to my shoulder.

But suddenly I gloried in the pain, for the bruising hulk of a man went down in a heap. I knew that back on Earth any man hit like that should have been down for the count of ten. But to my amazement, not so with this fellow. He clambered drunkenly to his knees, shaking his head back and forth. And as he reeled there, he bellowed in enraged violence.

On my arm I felt the pressure of soft fingers, heard the girl's urging, frightened voice. She was tugging at me. We were to flee ... while we had the chance.

Rubbing my stinging knuckles, I turned, and rather precipitately, ran at her heels, following her beckoning figure. There was something about that brutal fellow that chilled my blood.

Killer! That was the word. He would kill me, or I would have to kill him! That I did not want to do. Cowardice? No. I was yet a stripling, unused to such a savage world as this. And my intuition, along with the persuasive urging of the frightened girl, told me that much of existence here lay in flight, without any dishonor. So we fled, we two, into the night.

And behind us came the crashing of pursuit.

I swept the girl up in my arms. Queerly weightless, slim little body; on Earth I would have judged such a weight to be twenty pounds perhaps. I would have tried to climb into one of the trees, but her hand shoved and gestured. Shining water was near us, some twenty feet away. I ran for it, and she made me put her down, running with me. We plunged in.

Behind us the man stopped at the water's edge. His panting, baffled cry sounded—a hideous call. For a moment he stood on the shore, then he turned, lunged away. The underbrush crackled. Then abruptly ceased; he was waiting there, in ambush.

In the water beside me, the girl's pale face gleamed wetly. She looked up at me. Her soft, cool hand was on my arm, and she spoke in a musical series of syllables. I understood what she meant, from her motions. We would have to swim on, if we were to escape.

Together we swam. It was much like swimming in Earth-water. With her guiding me, we followed the jungle edge to where in a tangle of branches and vines, a vine-ladder hung from high overhead. I climbed it; amazingly easy to climb, with my weight half that of Earth and my strength the same—climbed with this amazing, lovely girl into a strange tree-top world ...



I was gazing upon a tangle of vegetation—a great spread of tangled vines, strange huge leaves, pods and flowers, matted here into an undulating surface.

A forest top! I could see it plainly now in the starlight. A lush, tangled jungle of gnarled, grotesque-shaped trees with their crooked branches and air-vines so intermingled that the top of it here was a spreading, continuous surface. The dim ground, black with shadows, was in spots faintly distinguishable a hundred feet or more below us.

And literally, this place was a village. Village in the tree-tops! Here this girl's people lived, and she had come back now, escaping from a strange man, savage, not of her people, yet human as she. What was the meaning of it? Why had the man pursued her, beyond simply the driving urge of his vicious nature? There had been hate, more than just frustration over her escape, in the bull-voice of the bearded man as he had plunged back into the forest there at the water's edge.

More to this than lay on the surface!

She spoke to me, her voice clear as silver now that the terror had all gone from it. I understood nothing, but I listened entranced, and as her people gathered around her, staring at me in wonder, at my strange clothes, she chattered to them excitedly, evidently recounting her escape from the beast-man, and my part in the encounter.

She told them, too, I could see from her gestures, of my Blaine-rocket, smashing down into her world from the skies.

But tiring of it all, I interrupted her. I pointed to myself and said:

"Lee Blaine. I am Lee Blaine. Who are you?"

She broke into a dimpled smile, and her eyes met mine with a new and kindling interest that was more than just curiosity.

"Lee Bla—a-a-ine!" she enunciated with a curious hesitation over the unfamiliar syllables. Then more swiftly, and with a pert, proud motion with one slim arm that included stabbing herself in the breast with a pointed forefinger, she said: "Aurita!"

I said it over, once, twice. Aurita. How amazingly descriptive! What it meant in her language, I could not know, but how close it came to Earthly "aura"! So apt; like the flame of her loveliness that surrounded her like a halo.

"Aurita." She said it again, herself, evidently greatly pleased with the way I had repeated it. And suddenly she laughed, aloud, clear. The tones echoed through the darkness of this strange tree-world. And in spite of myself, I found that I was laughing too, with some sheer exuberance that exuded from her very personality. Vibrant; pulsing with life she was. And yet, beyond our laughter, I thought I heard the thwarted shout of a burly beast of a man, lying in wait. Somewhere, over all this picture, was something evil ... suspended, ready to destroy all such laughter as now rang from the loveliest lips on two worlds.



CHAPTER III

The Forest People

I must summarize many Earth-months. Eighteen or twenty, perhaps, though I lost count. The little world of Zonara? I can give here only a brief sketch so that you who read this may at least try to understand. My necessity, and perhaps that the language is of fundamental simplicity, made it possible for me to learn it in that time. Certainly Aurita was a willing, persistent and skillful teacher. So I skip those twenty Earth-months of time, translating the quotations of my narrative as well as I can into the English equivalent ...

Little Zonara, second satellite of Earth. Some two hundred thousand miles outside the orbit of the Moon, it revolves around the Earth once in approximately fifty Earth-days. Presenting, like the Moon, always the same face to the Earth, it has nearly equal days and nights, each of some twenty-five Earth-hours. Most of its small, convex surface is a barren, rocky waste, with patches of forest. This forest, in which Aurita's people lived, was no more than sixty or seventy miles in extent.

The Forest People: There were, I understood, some ten thousand of them, scattered over the forest-top in little groups which could be called villages. Nearly half of them were concentrated here in the city of Dreen.

Strange little group of humans, living here in the tree-tops.

A primitive people, these tree-dwellers of little Zonara. Yet I found them possessed, not so much of a primitiveness of mind, but only primitive life, of necessity, and perhaps desire. Nature on the whole was to them beneficent. Their needs and their wants were few. Water came in the form of rain; food grew in the tree-tops; in some places they engaged in agriculture on the ground. All primitive; yet I found their intellects fundamentally the equal, perhaps the superior of my own.

And they were experimenting now with science; reviving the work of past generations which had progressed astonishingly in scattered, isolated directions. But it had been neglected, passing into tradition, since, as Aurita's father—Ruler here in the city of Dreen—once told me with his slow, quizzical smile, science seemed only to be leading them into complications which would make their way of life less happy. And I wonder if that is not an ironic commentary of our own great civilization on Earth!

Yet, there is another aspect. Perhaps no humans are destined to exist without problems—most of their own creation. It was a strange social order here, drifting now into its own created menace. I had thought I saw a lurking, submerged terror in Aurita's eyes. It was there. I saw it plainly, and I heard it in her voice, these months when she was teaching me her language. I recall those days when I was beginning to understand her words ...

"It is coming, Lee—bloodshed here—a time when man will stand against man and try to kill. And Ptyah, my father, will not see that. And old Caroh, his Counsellor, he just laughs. He says that the Nonites will not dare to rebel, and why should they not do the dangerous ground work? Of what use in our world is a Nonite, save to work for us? But that is wrong, Lee."

"Nonites?" I asked her. "What are they?"

She shook her head, a frown on her pretty face.

"It is strange to me," she confessed. "They are—just different. How, I do not know. Except that they are not male, or female, like other people. It is not that they are queer; they are just another kind—a kind we do not exactly understand. I think that they are equal to us. But others do not think so."

"But where do they come from?" I wondered.

"From the Forest People," she said. "Occasionally, in almost all of our families, there is a child born that is neither male or female—not like us. When such a one is born, it is set apart from the rest of the family, trained among its unfortunate

fellows into the lot of a ground-worker. A human being—and yet considered here not quite human. A sexless Thing, fashioned pathetically in its own mould—a Thing of muscle, brain, but supposed not to have emotion; no thought, no wish of its own but to do what it is told."

"What happens to them?" I asked curiously. "Why do you feel so perturbed over it? After all, it is something you cannot control. It would be wrong to assume them the same as yourselves, and make them try to fit into an environment that does not fit them."

"Some of them become slaves," Aurita explained. "But most of them are banished. They live in villages of their own. They are outcasts—shunned by every one of the Forest People. They are not permitted to return to their own families, except as slaves, and then only a few of them."

Aurita paused, her eyes sad, and filled with that mysterious fear that I had so often noted. I was about to question her about it when she went on.

"But that is wrong, Lee. A Nonite—how can we say what it thinks, what it feels? It is human, Lee—as human as we are." Aurita's little face was earnest and her eyes glowed. "You have seen the Nonites. You know we do not treat them right."

I had indeed seen them. Several worked here in the big dwelling of woven vines and thatch, bound into the tree-tops, which was the Ruler's home, perched at an edge of Dreen near where the forest ended at the lakeshore. The Nonites were about up to my shoulder in height. Taller, stronger than the men here, with well-formed heads and glistening hair, a face cast in handsome mould except for a more pallid, white skin and a curiously blank expression. It was as though nature had given them a mask to hide their emotions. But their eyes—

I recall that one of them came into the rustic little apartment where Aurita and I were talking, bringing us food and drink which she had ordered. This one was called Groff. It stood respectfully serving us. And then suddenly it said, to Aurita:

"You and the other Virgins—you have plans to help us Nonites?"

"Oh yes, we have indeed, Groff—"

"Because," the Nonite said, "two more of the ground-workers disappeared just before this last time of sleep. And I hear things among my people—"

I tensed. "What do you hear, Groff?"

It went suddenly sullen. But the gleaming, almost phosphorescent eyes of the Nonite sent a shudder through me.

"Nothing," Groff said. "That is just my idea to warn you."

It turned and stalked away—stalwart, pale-white thing of rippling muscles, clad in a brief nondescript white garment wound around its middle. The ghostly replica of a human being. I have seen groups of them toiling on the ground in the starlight. They look like phantoms.

That was the night when Aurita took me to the edge of the forest a little distance beyond the city outskirts, to show me the sparite crystals. The sparites were found in the distant barren lands; they had been known to the men of science of former generations. Natural image-receivers, they were termed here.^[2]

Dug from the ground, in the dark, they were carefully wrapped so that light did not touch them. Then, later, when opened to the light, they received the light rays of the scene around them, and mirrored it perpetually in their depths, like a crystal photograph.

With the enthusiasm of a child she dug into the earth, finally uncovering one of the crystals. Carefully, while I stood in bewilderment behind her in the dark, she wrapped it in a cloth and put it in a bag she carried slung over her slim shoulder. Then she dug another, and when we came from the forest, into the tree-tops, she explained to me.

"They will capture our images, with light. All we need do is look into them and step into the moonlight."

She handed one to me, and then took the other herself.

"Smile into it," she said naively, "so that you will look nice!"

Then we walked out of the dark into a moonlit patch in a clearing. And as I stared into the crystal, I saw mirrored in its depths my own features, smiling back at me. And they grew clearer, resolved from shadowy dimness to sparkling, moonlit clarity. I gasped.

There, within that crystal, my image, clear as the crystal itself, and eerie in its naturalness! And though I was no longer smiling, but amazed, the image did not change. As it had first received my image it remained—permanent, wonderfully real and perfect in every detail.

I snatched her crystal from her and looked into it. There she was, every lovely feature of her, smiling back at me.

"It is yours," she murmured. "So that you will always be able to see me when you wish ..."

"It—it is beautiful, Aurita," I murmured.

I touched her, with some of my emotion undoubtedly stamped upon my face, but she drew away with a sudden, half-frightened virginal timidity. She had always been like that. And yet there were times when she would gaze at me slantwise, with her dark eyes impish as though to provoke my love-making ...

"Let us go down to the castle-cliff and look over the lake," she said hastily now. "We can see the island where my brother, and his colleagues work."



CHAPTER IV

Aurita's Fear Explained

I had met her brother, Raalt—a slim, handsome young fellow nearly as tall as myself. Several hundred of the young virgins here in Dreen had long ago sworn that they would do all they could to help the Nonites; and Raalt had felt the same. He was one of ten young men who were working now in a science-laboratory which had been established on a small island—a honeycombed rock like a little gibraltar in the lake some twenty miles distant.

It was called Castle-Cliff. They were working there on a vibration-beam. Traditions of it had come down from former generations; old apparatus had been found. A vibration which dissolved any living tissue with which for a moment or two it came in contact. A weapon to use against the criminals—such as the beast man with whom I had fought that first day I landed on Zonara. Then the Virgins and children could venture on the ground in safety; agriculture would be more extensive. All the Forest People would be benefited. The tree-tops gradually could be abandoned; the ground at last would be habitable.

Fatuous humans! As though a weapon like that would be used only for such a purpose! Our whole history of earth has demonstrated the contrary.

"You see," Aurita told me with her girlish enthusiasm. "That we have promised the Forest People. Never will there be danger to them again. My brother and I—we persuaded my father and his Counsellors that the weapons must be made. Our flying knives^[3]—they are really useless against the criminals."

I wondered again about these beast men, but I had no opportunity to question her now.

Raalt and the young men with him were just finishing the projectors. A dozen or more of them, with an effective range of some five hundred feet ...

Aurita and I, that starlit night, went down a little path leading to a tunnel-mouth entrance to the inner grottos some miles down the lake.

And then suddenly, on the path Aurita gripped me.

"Look Lee—how strange—one of Raalt's companions—"

The figure had abruptly appeared coming along the path. He seemed lurching, staggering, as though perhaps he had been drinking too much *palka*—intoxicating beverage, made from the pulp of tree-pods. We held our breaths as we watched him with his unsteady, lurching steps. Then he staggered off the path, into a patch of shadow where he seemed to fall. We waited, but he did not rise.

Queer. Surely Raalt and his young men were working too hard out there to bother with *palka*. I met Aurita's white-faced stare.

"He—looked drunk," she said. "On the mainland, on a spree ..."

I nodded.

"Well—" I said. "Too bad—"

We were abruptly too perturbed to voice our thoughts. To us both it had seemed, for days now, as though some unseen menace were descending upon our little world. Forces here, brewing with an aura of evil that you couldn't miss. The sullen, resentful Nonites; Raalt's dissolving beam—lethal weapon seemingly so out of place in this quiet, primitive little realm—so fatuous of us to think that it would only be used against the criminals!

Aurita seemed to read my tumultuous sweep of thoughts.

"The men of crime," she burst out abruptly. "Oh Lee, I am so afraid of them—out there on their island-ring. Afraid of them—all my life."

I drew her down beside me on the rocks beside the path.

"What is it, Aurita," I asked. "What is it that you fear so much?"

She looked at me, her eyes troubled. Then she spoke. Strange story she told me there in the moonlight. Incredible. But true; I could see it in the trembling of her lips as she spoke.

"It is our civilization. Something wrong with it. To most of us, it is the Nonites who are the cause of all the trouble. Yet, to a few of us, the real answer is obvious. But what can we do about it—unless, soon, the new weapons are ready ..."

"Ah!" I interrupted. "I knew it!"

"Knew what?" She looked at me puzzled.

"Never mind," I said. "Let me hear more."

"I've called them criminals. Although among the Forest People there is no crime. No theft, no murder—that is," she amended hastily "until lately. Among us there is only one important class of criminal. The kidnaper."

"The kidnaper?" I frowned.

"Yes. It is a crime against both the children and the Virgins. It is punishable by life-exile. The real crime is kidnaping of children, but it has come to include the Virgins too, because they too could be of the same use to the kidnapers ..."

"I don't understand ..." I began.

"You will. Remember the man you fought the day you came to Zonara? He was a kidnaper, sentenced to life-exile because he tried to make advances to a girl. Little evidence of intent to kidnap is necessary. Only the girl's statement, with perhaps a few corroborating statements.

"Some three hundred kidnapers are in exile now. They are on a little island near the one where my brother, Raalt is working. It is where the castle-cliff turns a sweeping right angle, and the lake broadens into a great forty-mile, almost circular expanse. It is in the center of this expanse, a lone island of a few hundred acres.

"There is a little soil there; a few stunted, gnarled trees, with vines, pods and flowers. Crime Island, we call it. The three hundred kidnapers have been banished there; they live in crude stone and thatched dwellings; grow a little food. And at intervals food and minor necessities are taken to them. No offender is supposed to build a watercraft and leave the island. That is a crime punishable by death. And yet, they do leave—more now than ever ..."

I interrupted her now.

"But why kidnapers?" I asked. "What can they possibly gain from kidnaping. Is it ransom? I didn't even know you had money here?"

"Money? What is that? No, we do not have it here, whatever it is. The reason for the kidnaping is because of the Nonites. You see, it is a law among the Forest People that any Nonite couple who shall marry and bear a normal human child, shall thereby regain their status as human beings, and be freed either from slavery or exile. Thus, the crime of kidnaping, which is the worst crime that can be committed on Zonara, has become prevalent. Babies are stolen, delivered to the Nonites who wish to escape their exile, or be freed of their servitude, and they pass it off as their own child."

"I see," I said slowly, the light breaking over me now. "But what of the Virgins?"

"They are kidnaped too," she shuddered, "and they are never seen again. It is believed by most of us that they are forced to marry a criminal of the Crime Island, and their children, being normal human children, sold to the Nonites in return for something, some favor, that we haven't discovered yet. Raalt thinks they are dealing in weapons—flying knives, boats ... but we do not know for sure."

She was silent for a moment, then she started up.

"We must go back to Dreen," she said swiftly.

"You going to tell your father what we saw?" I suggested.

"No. You and I—we must go to the island and see Raalt."

A desire to shield her brother and his companions, because that might have been a drunken man we saw!

The tree-top tangle swayed with a little rising night-wind as we followed one of the thatched bridge-like paths. A storm coming? Then the city of Dreen showed in the starlight before us.

Fantastic little group of human habitations. Mound-shaped little dwellings of brown and purple thatch, roped into the tree-tops like birds' nests. At different levels; in little groups, or strung in rows. Platforms were in front of some, where the people lounged in the starlight. Ladders and roped vines connected them; thatched paths at intervals lay like streets; and at lower levels other strung paths were almost like little tunnels through the lush tangle of foliage.

Flimsy city. It had that appearance now as it swayed, undulating gently in the rising night-wind. Torchlight showed through the side openings of the larger dwelling, roped into the branches of one of the highest trees, which was Aurita's home. We found Aurita's father there, with Caroh, his chief Counsellor. And Torm, Caroh's son.

Torm was speaking as we entered. He was a tall young fellow, nearly my own height; wide-shouldered, powerful. His face, with high-bridged nose, wide thin slit of mouth and the queer slant eyes, was considered handsome masculinity here. His well-muscled figure was clad in short, brown leather jacket and a round, purple lower garment, knee length. The insignia of his rank as sub-Counsellor was a varicolored band of fabric which he wore around his forehead, binding his brown tangled hair which fell long about his ears and was cut at the base of his neck.

"If the Virgins had not promised so much," Torm was saying, "then would the Nonites perhaps not have gotten these ideas."

"The Nonites will do as they are told," old Ptyah, Aurita's father, retorted. "I shall call them and talk to them. Two of them dead, mysteriously murdered? And what is that? The others should be thankful it was not they."

Old Ptyah looked at Caroh for approbation.

Long ago I had, I think, correctly judged these two men. Aurita's father, ill now, weak of will, with the traditions of the social order here the only things in his mind. But this Caroh was different. A scheming fellow of perhaps fifty. Whatever, his purpose, certainly on Earth I would not have trusted him with a minimum copper coin, even though it was counterfeit. Nor his son, Torm.

Or was that because I was jealous? Torm certainly was a handsome, swaggering fellow here. And of all the young virgins, I could not miss that it was Aurita to whom he was most attentive.

We sat for a time listening to the talk. The Nonites seemed upon the verge of rebelling—a thing unprecedented, unthinkable.

"If any Nonite dares rebel," Caroh was saying grimly, "I will toss that Nonite off the castle-cliff while the rest of them watch. That will fix them."

"That you will never do," Aurita said abruptly.

"The Virgins," Caroh retorted, "talk too much. If they had not started this trouble, encouraging the Nonites—"

I drew Aurita away. Outside the wind was still rising. If we were going to see her brother, certainly we should be starting. Torm followed us to the door-oval. He took me aside.

"You never speak to put your word into our affairs," he said. "Perhaps you are right." He glanced at Aurita and lowered his voice. "The Virgins mean well—I agree with them, of course. But—you might as well know it, Lee—I am more worried over this thing than I will say."

"So am I," I agreed.

"Your flying platform," he said. "You have it neatly ready? Surely a wonderful thing—especially for us men who cannot ride the aerites."^[4]

"Yes, almost ready," I evaded. It was completely ready, though Aurita and I had not yet tested it—a little platform which I had constructed from the gravity plates of the wrecked Blaine-rocket in which I had come from Earth.

"That is good," Torm said. "I shall be glad to try it with you."

We got away from him presently; descended a vine-ladder to where Aurita's small boat was at the lakeshore—a narrow, canoe-shaped hull some thirty feet long. Its bow was decked over for a little shelter. It had a triangle of thatch for a crude sail. It was a buoyant, fragile little vessel, light as though built of cork. With a fair following wind it could make astonishing speed; or with adverse wind, be paddled like a canoe.

We sat in the stern, with the wind now behind us. Soon the flickering lights of Dreen were fading; the dark blob of the forest-edge merged in the gloom.

For a time we did not talk. Beside me Aurita sat steering, staring grimly ahead. The wind fluttered her long golden hair forward over her shoulders. It brushed me, and my fingers entwined in one of its soft tresses that lay on the seat between us.

"This could almost be on Earth," I said softly. My words mingled with the sighing of the wind and the slap of the water against our bow. "Aurita dear—"

Almost like Earth? As though to belie my words, to one side of us, above the close-curving horizon of this convex little world, a flash of red lightning split the sky. And then came the booming, eerie crack of muffled reverberating thunder. A red-storm coming ...^[5]

"Lee—look there—"

She gestured ahead of us. The watery horizon was no more than two Earth-miles away. A boat coming toward us had suddenly appeared. A boat, smaller than our own, being paddled into the wind. We were up to it in a moment. It was Aurita's brother, alone in the stern. I dropped our sail and we brought the boats together. Raalt was pallid, shaking.

"One of our men found stabbed," he gasped. "A flying knife that cut into his side."

That staggering man we had seen on the path! Quite evidently he had been bleeding from the wound, had been trying to get back to his boat, to his companions, and had fallen in the shadows beside the path, where later Raalt had found him.

"He was just dying," Raalt was gasping. "He was just able to murmur—an exile—escaped from the island of crime—who killed him!"

The kidnapers had dared to leave their island of crime! They were roaming loose, killing...! It was as though the red lightnings at the horizon were a symbol of the crimson torrent that now would engulf our little world! The men of crime; the unfortunate Nonites; the altruistic, crusading virgins ... Diverse human motives, brewing here for so long in this little cauldron—simmering with an aura of impending horror ...

And now it had broken loose!

CHAPTER V

Grotto of Death

We stared numbed at Raalt, with the red lightnings flashing again at the horizon and our little boats bobbing on the waves in the rising wind. I had with me a single small weapon which I had brought from Earth—a little heat-gun, capable of drilling a hole through a man at a distance up to some thirty feet. Futile weapon indeed, with what seemed upon us now.

"And that murderer, he escaped from you?" Aurita was saying.

Murderer! The very sound of the word made both of them shudder. There had been no murderers here on little Zonara.

"Yes," Raalt agreed. "We searched our rock. He must have come and gone in a boat. But there are so many caves—the rest of us were searching still when I left to get help from Dreen. We have no boat there just now big enough for us all, and the weapons."

"The projectors are ready?" I demanded.

"Yes, for the criminals. They will work—they will kill the murderers—"

Another stab of the red lightning flashed up from the horizon—a great forked crimson streak. It struck the sullen, scudding purple clouds, painted them with crimson. And for that second, put a blood-red stain upon us all.

Aurita was gripping me.

"Oh, Lee—what shall we do? Our boat here—so big, hardly could we shove it against this wind to get back to Dreen."

"I will go to Dreen," Raalt put in. "My smaller boat—I can handle it if I start now. And tell them in Dreen that our projectors are ready. Never again will there be danger on the ground for the Forest People."

Danger? My memory went back to the sullen Nonite, Groff. The Nonites were smouldering with rebellion now. Their resentment had startlingly increased within the last few days. Was there some connection between that and this exile who had dared leave his island of crime and commit murder? Raalt and Aurita were gazing at me—both of them so young—looking to me to say what should be done. It was the first time in this world that anyone ever had done that. My world now ...

"I'll go on to the castle-cliff," I said abruptly. "The projectors must be mounted, made ready. Raalt, you take Aurita—go to Dreen—tell your father there is danger—real danger. Have the young men of Dreen organize to watch the Nonites." I leaned toward him so that perhaps Aurita would not hear. "Have those young men armed with the flying knives. If any Nonite causes trouble—that Nonite must be killed, you understand? It may precipitate things, but I don't think so. I think the other Nonites would be frightened."

Aurita had heard me. She gave a little cry of protest, and then checked herself. How quickly one may get used to the necessity of bloodshed!

"Yes, I will do that," Raalt agreed. "And your volplane—the little anti-gravity flying platform—"

"It's ready. I'll test it when I get back—"

"Oh—look there—" Aurita said. "An aerite coming. A girl is riding it—"

We followed Aurita's gesture. Off in the lurid storm-sky—in the direction away from Dreen—a little dot was visible. It came struggling nearer, flying toward Dreen against the wind. An aerite winging toward us. Then we could see the brown blob of the girl astride its back, with her arms around its neck and her hair and her draperies fluttering.

"It is Jeena," Aurita suddenly murmured.

I knew Jeena quite well. Little sixteen-year-old virgin, like Aurita, save that her hair was not golden, but tinged with an auburn light. It was understood that she was to be Raalt's mate, when they were older. She saw our two boats clinging together, bobbing here on the waves, and her hand pressing her aerite's head guided the bird down to us. It swooped; and then with back-fluttering wings landed skillfully on top of our decked-over bow. Its cheeping voice was eager with recognition of Aurita and Raalt. And I thought then that the huge bird flung a glance at the little bow-cabin of our craft, with the feathers of its neck ruffling. Queer. But I forgot it with the shock of Jeena's first words.

"I was flying near the island of crime," she gasped at us. "They must have been building boats there secretly for a long time—"

"Boats—" Raalt echoed numbly.

"And they are getting ready to leave in them," Jeena finished. "Oh, Raalt, I was coming to the castle-cliff to tell you—"

Strange little counsel of war, here on the lake, our frail craft in the midst of the gathering crimson storm. Raalt, in his small boat was to go to Dreen, with Jeena winging ahead of him to spread the news. I would go on to the castle-cliff and with the young men there get the fifty projectors of the dissolving ray ready. Boats from Dreen would be sent to us.

The thought of those vibration-projectors with their five hundred-foot range heartened me. What had we to fear from a few hundred roaming criminals armed with knives perhaps, and with crude implements of agriculture? Or what to fear from rebellious Nonites?

But haste undoubtedly was necessary. Aurita now had refused to go back with her brother to Dreen. She insisted on going with me, and I yielded. Strange little Aurita. So gentle, but now she said suddenly:

"You, Jeena—it may be that my father will not realize that this is an emergency. He has very strange counsel. Jeena—you call the virgins together. As many as you can get. Have them take their aerites—and you fly with them to our meeting place. You understand?"

"Oh, yes—yes," Jeena agreed. Her eyes too were flashing. She drew herself erect, with her red-gold hair blowing in the wind and her young bosom panting under the bodice of her little brown-red druid-garment. "If there is to be—danger," she added, "the virgins will do their part."

"You tell them I will come there and join them," Aurita said. "Go now—and you, my brother, do your best—"

The red glare of lightning painted us as we separated—Raalt forcing his little boat forward and Jeena rising with her aerite and winging away. Then Aurita and I raised our small sail; our craft, caught by the wind, skimmed forward over the white-capped waves.

It was some fifteen miles further to the castle-cliff. We made it in half an hour. The red-storm still seemed mostly below the horizon. The wind was puffy; the overhead, swift-flying clouds were low. With the lightning darting at intervals, the clouds were a great blood-red blanket, undulating close over us.

Then out of the red-murk ahead, the little castle-cliff loomed. It was a two hundred-foot rock-spire. Pitted and honeycombed with crevices and cave-openings. Fantastic little rock rising naked out of the water—ridged and terraced with multiple little needle-peaks dotting it. Around its base, where in places there was a little level apron of rocky ground, the lake was pounding. Red waves; crimson spray ...

We landed in the lee of the rock where there was a small cove.

"The entrance to the laboratory is on the other side," Aurita said. "A little tunnel-passage there. My brother and the others fixed up two small grottos. You will see they have it well-equipped. Laboratory work that could not be done in our swaying tree-tops—"

We had tied up our boat and gone ashore. As we rounded the base of the rock, the wind and spray hit us, whipping away Aurita's words. And then I felt her clutch me.

"Oh, Lee—our boat—"

I turned. Our narrow little boat, with its sail raised, was heading out of the cove! A man's figure was in its stern, guiding it. As he reached the rougher water outside the cove we saw him stand up, heaving overboard one of the small outriding cylinder-pontoons, with its razor-keel to prevent side-slipping when sailing cross-wind. A big figure with a band around his forehead, holding his waving bushy hair.

It was Torm, Son of Caroh, the Chief Counsellor. He had been hiding in our bow-cabin, of course. No wonder the aerite-bird, scenting his presence, had seemed startled. He saw us on the shore and stood up, waving with a jibing gesture. My little heat-gun was in my hand, but he was far too distant to be within range.

The wind brought his ironic voice:

"The Earthman is a fool. Have nothing to do with him—you, my dear one—remember what I told you? The time would come when you—and all virgins—will do what the men command. That time has come—"

His mocking laugh ended his words. I gripped Aurita.

"What does he mean by that?"

"Oh, Lee, I never told you—Caroh has three sons. Torm, and two older brothers. And those other two—they have been banished. Kidnapers several years ago—"

How clearly I could understand it now! The wily Caroh, with his counsel of oppression for the Nonites—stirring them into rebellion! Two of his older sons on the island of crime? Of course he would plot to release them. And Torm—

"What does he mean," I insisted, "saying he told you all virgins must yield to the men?"

Her gaze would not meet mine.

"He—he did say that. Oh, I never told you, Lee—just before you came—he—he tried to force marriage upon me. But I did not love him. He said he was sorry—pleaded with me. So I forgave—"

"I see. That's enough, Aurita—I understand—" She was trembling as my arm held her against me.

Out on the tumbled, blood-red water Torm with our boat slanted over the waves toward the distant crime-island. To join his brothers. To lead them, of course, against the city of Dreen, where their father was waiting with the Nonites stirred into rebellion.

But what had we to fear, with the fifty projectors of the vibration ray which could dissolve human flesh? Those projectors must be assembled and taken to Dreen at once—mounted there before the Nonites could act, and before Torm and his men could attack ...

We came to the small tunnel-mouth entrance. It was here that Aurita and I had seen that wounded young fellow staggering along the path. I stopped. His blood still showed on the rocks here. The curved knife-blade that had stabbed him was still lying here where Raalt had drawn it out of his side.

"Lee—look here—back at Dreen—"

Aurita called to me as I was examining the knife. She was standing at the cliff-top. I joined Aurita, and we peered. The tree-top horizon back toward Dreen was red and murky with the storm. No one, nothing, in sight there across the water. And then I saw a tiny blob of figure. A Nonite. And then another and another. Stalking forward, furtive in the foliage—pallid-white figures, like shifting ghosts stained crimson when the lightning glares painted them. Ghosts drenched in blood, stalking the city ...

I drew the shuddering Aurita away.

"We must get inside—tell Raalt's companions all this—and get the projectors assembled—"

It was so silent in the dim passageway with the lash and roar of the storm, muffled and then gone. Silent, as death ...

"Aurita—you stay behind me—"

With my small weapon in hand, slowly I advanced. My heart was pounding. In the heavy silence here I could seem to hear it knocking against my ribs. And suddenly I gasped; and Aurita, half behind me, gave a low, startled cry.

The passageway had opened into a small grotto, which Raalt and his fellows had draped with grass rugs and mats on the floor. The characteristic low, rattan-like furniture of chairs and a table was here. And a dim form, lighted by the flickering brazier of tree-gum which still burned in its bracket on the wall.

A young man lying here. We bent over him. His throat was a crimson welter, almost severing his neck so that his head dangled askew. A young fellow not much older than Raalt. His dead eyes, still seeming to hold horror and the agony of death, stared mutely at us. But he wasn't the one whom Raalt had told us had been murdered! And then we saw another—and another ...

Forgetful of ourselves, we rushed into the adjoining laboratory. Its stone workbenches were overturned; chairs were strewn; apparatus and tools of the work which had been carried on here, lay in a litter on the floor. Mute evidence of the struggle for life which Raalt's young companions had put up before they were overcome. And here in the wreckage the rest of them lay. One was decapitated. Another lay hacked, horrible with gore. Ghastly evidence of the ferocity of the attackers ...

I pushed Aurita back ...

And then we saw one burly fellow of the attackers dead here. From the crime island; his forehead was emblazoned with the crimson star, badge of his dishonor which had been branded there when he was convicted and exiled.

Grotto of death. Mingled with the aromatic smell of the resin torches there was the horrible stench of gore.

Every one of the young men scientists dead.

And the weapons were gone!

CHAPTER VI

Army of the Virgins

Marooned. We ran out of the grottos, back to the storm-lashed rock shore. Alone here on the island, with what bloody events about to break forth back in Dreen I could only shudderingly imagine. Baffled, helpless rage swept me. What was going on back there? I thrust away the weird pictures my strained imagination conjured.

"Oh, Lee, how will any boat get to us from Dreen, in this storm? What will we do now? Those crimson-star men from the crime-island—"

The wind whipped at her words and flung them away into the murk. The storm now had broken into full intensity. For how long, I have no idea, we huddled among the rocks, gazing with awe at this wrath of nature. Weird, fantastic scene indeed.

The wind, slanting at us from the direction of Dreen, now was a steady roar. Rain was falling—great sheets of driving droplets that slanted almost horizontal. Overhead, purple and orange-green cloud-vapors had lowered, racing so close that the spires of the little castle-cliff split them as like a turgid purple river the vapors flowed past. The lake was a seething mass of waves now—white-caps with the spume blown from them to mingle with the rain.

Momentarily there had been no lightning flares. The scene was a deep turgid purple. All but the water of the lake. The waves there had stirred an opalescence in the water. The flying spume shimmered iridescent—a million-million pearl-drops pelting us. And then the lightning came again—a seemingly horizontal flash from one horizon to the other. A sustained bolt, this time. Through what seemed an eternity it hung like a giant, blood-stained scimitar arching over our heads.

Awesome glare of glorious splendor. The clouds seemed dripping blood—every rain droplet glistening crimson, mingling with the opalescence of the spume. The sky was crimson—the lake suddenly a sea of gore. Ghastly premonitory symbol.

Beside me the crouching little figure of Aurita, her wet brown drapes plastered to the lithe young lines of her body—her golden tresses tossing in the wind—suddenly I saw her as though soaked in blood, so that I held her closer, shuddering.

And then, with the eerie crackling thunderclap rolling away, engulfed by the storm-roar, the red sword over us melted and was gone. The deep purple gloom settled here again, like a tragic mask to hide the blood that had been spilled.

"I think that was the worst of it," Aurita said. "The red-storms usually do not last long."

Another interval, and then I could feel that the wind was lessening. Then the rain ceased, with an orange glow on the rifted clouds and the red lightnings again at the horizon, growling and muttering.

"They ought to be able to send that boat to us from Dreen, starting about now," I suggested.

"Yes," she agreed.

It seemed obvious to me that the storm, a disadvantage to us, had also been a disadvantage to Torm and his men. But there were some three hundred of them, there on the crime-island. They had the projectors of the dissolving vibration-ray, of course. Doubtless they had landed on the castle-cliff, just about the time Raalt left, so that he was the only survivor there. They had boats now at the crime-island, as Jeena had told us. And with the rays, they would come to attack Dreen. I could picture those rays, hurled into the little forest city.

"The storm will have delayed them," I was saying to Aurita. "And now, if we can get away from here—"

To do what? But Aurita saw it perhaps more clearly than I did.

"They must not reach Dreen," she said grimly. "And it is the Virgins who will stop them—kill them."

Grim, set little face. The red-purple of the stormlight made her slant eyes deep turgid pools. Miserable commentary upon mankind, that now these events, all man-created, could make gentle little Aurita thirst for blood, with her lips pressed together and her fists clenched as she envisaged how she would try to kill. Instinct of self-preservation. It can make a killer of anyone, of anything that lives ...

Then the storm broke away. The rifted clouds thinned, gloriously painted orange and green until that too faded and patches of silver stars were showing—starlight that gleamed to glorify the sullen spent waves of the lake; and gleamed on the little pools of water here in the rock-hollows beside us.

Calm and quiet beauty after the storm. That was nature's way. But our storm of human conflict wasn't over. It was just beginning. If only this could be an omen of its end for Aurita and me ...

"No boat coming yet?" I murmured.

"No. I don't see any."

I wondered if Torm had been able to reach the crime-island, or if the storm had engulfed him. Fervently I hoped that it had.

"Lee—could that be an aerite?" Aurita said presently.

In the sky, off toward Dreen where now the clouds were only a thin stream of opal vapor, a little dot had appeared. At first we thought it might be one of the bird-like aerites, winging toward us. But then as it enlarged, it showed as a flat, squarish blob, wingless. At an altitude of only a hundred feet above the lake, it came sliding through the air toward us ...

My volplane! It was an oblong platform some fifteen by twenty feet, built of wood into which I had erected some of the mechanisms and segments of the anti-gravity plates from the wrecked Blaine-rocket in which I had arrived. Artificial gravity-repulsion, enough to raise it or hold it poised, and with electronic little rocket streams to give it lateral motion. The faint violet streams were visible now, like a tiny spreading comet-tail behind it.

Then as it slowed and lowered, we saw a man's figure lying prone on it, clinging to the hand-holds I had devised. And piles of racked silver-gleaming objects were stacked beside him, lashed with thongs to the platform's planks.

It was Raalt. He had, upon occasion, helped me build the volplane. He knew how to operate it. I held my breath now as he waved to us, checking his advance almost over us, with a dozen of the little violet gas-streams giving the platform a circular rotation. And then with gravity attraction, he was descending to the rocks near us.

"Easy!" I shouted. "Don't smash it, Raalt!"

"Why should I?" he called back. His grinning boyish face, flushed with his excitement, projected for a moment over the platform edge. And then he landed, with not too much of a thump and no damage done.

"Knew I could do it," he laughed. "This thing is just grand, Lee—"

But his laugh faded when we told him that there was no one here but ourselves—and the dead, his murdered fellow-workers. And that the ray-projectors were gone.

"Why—why—" he gasped. "They're going to send a boat here from Dreen, but that's no use now. Why—then those crimson-star men can attack us with our own weapons! Rays to dissolve human flesh—used upon the city of Dreen—"

"Yes," I agreed. "They've got boats there at the crime-island—probably starting now—"

It numbed him, and then he gasped,

"That damned Torm. You, my sister, I always told you he was dangerous for a girl to be with. Damned dirty villain—"

"Right," I agreed. "But that doesn't help us now. You arranged for the young men to organize in Dreen—"

"Yes, surely I did. Father always has two hundred—what you on Earth, as you tell me, call a police force. He will have a thousand others added to them within an hour or two. Jeena is getting the girls to fly to your meeting place," he added to Aurita. "Some have got their knives—but I thought I would bring some more, and take you to join them."

His face had gone white as what we really were facing now dawned on him. He gripped me.

"Lee, I thought—the girls meeting with their aerites—that was a good idea, because mostly it would get them out of danger in Dreen. But now—but now, these crime men coming with our projectors—why my God, if they reach Dreen—"

"But they will not!" Aurita cried. "My girls will stop them—who else?"

If only I had had some warning of this! If only men could fly on the aerites! But that was impossible. If I had had more time, perhaps to duplicate my gravity-plates and little rocket streams, so that I could have constructed a dozen of these platforms, with young men upon them, to attack the boats of the oncoming enemy! Futile thoughts!

Aurita and I lay with Raalt on the volplane. I took the controls, raised it off the apron of rocks there by the little castle-cliff. And at an altitude of a hundred feet or so we slid smoothly through the air, heading for the Virgins' meeting place. It was partly toward Dreen, but back from the lake where the forest frayed out and there was only naked desolation of the barrenlands where animals of a dozen weird kinds roamed, feeding upon each other, and upon slithering, frightened reptiles.

Weird, tumbled landscape of glowering desolation. Grey-black, porous rocks, burned and pitted as though by a Titan's blowtorch. Occasionally as we passed, slithering things were visible down there in the silvery darkness.

Steadily the wild landscape rose into terraced jagged hills. The Virgins' gathering place was at the top of a black crystalline peak—giant triangular shaft that rose some three hundred feet above the surrounding wastes. A table-rock top surmounted it—grey-black marble-like surface, with a ring of great boulders around its depressed center.

We landed smoothly. A dozen or more of the girls were already here, with their huge aerite-birds docilely among them. And now as we unpacked the crescent knife-blades and the slings to hurl them, other girls on the great birds were arriving from Dreen. They came singly and in little groups, for a moment circling overhead, with the *cheep* of the aerites mingling with the girls' cries of greeting as they swooped down and landed.

Little Jeena was here, her face flushed with excitement, her bosom heaving under her brown-red bodice, her red-gold hair in a sheen glinting with starlight as it enveloped her.

"Four hundred of our girls," she told Aurita and me excitedly. "They are coming."

Weird, starlit eyrie, this gathering place of the Virgins, up here in the silvery night. The aerites were bringing them now in clusters, circling, with girlish, excited voices calling down; and then the back-flapping beating wings of the giant birds as they alighted. Soon the rocks echoed with the girls' chatter and like dogs the fluffy brown and green aerites caught the excitement, standing with flapping wings and excited bird-calls.

I stood with Aurita, silently watching. Some of the girls had brought slings and knives; Raalt and Jeena were distributing them to the others. My heart welled with queerly mixed emotions. Frail, beautiful little creatures, these Virgins of the Forest People. Excited now. Enthusiastic. Girding themselves for battle. Laughing as though it were a game. But there was death ahead, for them ...

And nothing that I could do to stop them. Nor could I even dare want to stop them. The thought of the city of Dreen assailed by the men from the crime-island with their rays—the helpless old men and women, the mothers, the children there—that was a greater horror.

And it must have been that Aurita was sharing my thoughts, my emotions. For suddenly with a leap that carried her

twenty feet from me, she mounted a butte-like rock, facing the chattering, assembled girls, with her arms flung up for silence.

Amazing, this transformation of the gentle little druid-girl I had thought I knew! Like a Valkyrie she stood, up there in the starlight. Transfigured. Every beautiful line of her was tense, dominant, commanding. And then she spoke:

"Virgins of Dreen—we have been always for gentleness, for love. Always have we wanted to help the Nonites, for we know they too, are human. Never would any one of us raise a hand in violence against another human. Unthinkable! But it isn't unthinkable any longer. From the island of crime the crimson-star men of crime have dared to escape. They have stolen the ray-weapons.

"And the men of crime now will turn those weapons against our city. They will rule our Forest People. Oh, you know what that means for you and for me. You know their purpose. And to achieve it they will kill. Your mother to be killed. Your father, and mine—and your little sisters and brothers ...

"And so we must stop them. A virgin now, for the first time, must kill. That is a terrible thing. But if we do not, what surely will happen is worse."

Battle cry of the Valkyries. She sounded it suddenly—a little throaty call that must have sprung within her, inspired by the blood of some remote ancestress who fought and killed for her mate. And four hundred girlish voices echoed it.

Battle cry of the Virgins. It welled up into the starlight—voices of purity who would fight to keep it unsullied. Who would fight and kill with primitive ferocity to save those they loved. And who would die, still fighting and unafraid.

They were all assembled here now. Then with slings in hand, with a dozen of the curved blades hung at their waists, they mounted the aerites. And rose in little groups, circling overhead.

Raalt and I, grim and tense, watched them until they were all aloft. Then we mounted the volplane. At least a hundred extra slings and knife-blades were piled beside us. Slowly, with gathering speed, the little anti-gravity platform rose. The girls, led by Aurita, who now wore a garment of flaming red—their leader, and behind her Jeena, were circling, milling, forming into the small flying groups as they had planned.

Frail, fluttering little army, with only its bravery for its chief weapon ...

I met Raalt's grim gaze; and suddenly he burst out:

"Oh, if only we had never revived that damnable ray—"

How often that has been said in the recent history of our own Earth! Science for the benefit of mankind! With what ghastly mockery the lust of man has turned it into exactly the opposite! So often indeed, that one may truly wonder whether Earth would not be better without that science of which our age so proudly boasts!

I swung our volplane ahead of the four hundred girls. Behind us they were flying now in forty little groups of ten, strung out in a double line, with Aurita leading them.

What a picture she made, astride the aerite, arm upraised in the signal to advance!

Within a few minutes we had crossed the barrenlands and were out over the starlit lake. I swung higher. Five hundred feet; then seven or eight hundred—surely beyond range of the enemy projectors. At the lake I turned, not toward Dreen, but toward the castle-cliff, where far to the left an arm of the lake opened into the big forty-mile lagoon which held the island of crime.

The volplane was flying faster now. With the groups of girls strung out in a single line behind us, we advanced to battle.

CHAPTER VII

Blood of Zonara

Raalt and I crouched on the volplane, planning the conduct of our attack. We had already been able to scan all of the lake down to Dreen. There was no sign of the enemy vessels; it was obvious that they had not yet come into this arm of the lake.

We swept on, until presently the little castle-cliff came into view. Starlight glimmered on it like a silver halo. To the left here the lake bent in a sweeping wide curve, opening into a big irregularly circular basin, in the center of which, some twenty miles further, the crime-island lay, a little dark dot against the silvery surface.

"Those girls should stay back," Raalt said presently. He gestured to where two of the groups of ten girls had urged their aerites forward so that now, one group on each side, they were passing us.

Weird sight, those two little squads, seeming trying to race with us the huge brown birds with their great spread of flapping green wings were stretching their necks and big gray-blue bills forward. The girls, astride them, were slim brown blobs, with pink-white legs pressing close into the birds' brown feathered body. The wind rushed past, fluttered the girls' brownish drapes and flowing hair.

I stood half erect, gripping one of the volplane's hand-holds to steady myself in the rush of wind. Close behind us Aurita was flying. Her red garment set her apart like a red-storm lightning flash.

"Bring those girls back," I shouted.

Her waved hand answered me; she urged her aerite to greater speed, herded off the two groups, sent them behind us ...

And then we sighted the enemy boats. They were just leaving the crime island. The storm undoubtedly had delayed them; and probably also the assembling and erecting of the projectors. We saw them now—a boat coming out from the island, and then another.

I rose higher, swung off to one side with the girls obediently following. For ten minutes or so we waited. Then another boat came; and then a fourth.

My signal to Aurita and to Jeena held the girls back; and at eight hundred or a thousand foot altitude, I sent the volplane skimming forward so that we passed almost directly over the little line of boats. Four of them, and no more seemed coming.

They were crude wooden affairs, each some thirty feet long, wide and cumbersome. Open boats, not decked over. We could make out the black dots of the men crowding them; some seventy-five in each, doubtless. A line of them at the gunwales, manning long sweeps, like oars, sent the heavy craft slowly forward.

I turned us back to rejoin the girls. The boats were some five hundred feet apart. As we passed back over the leader, a little pencil ray of orange light stabbed at us. The first shot.

It fell far short. It was a thin narrow beam, certainly no bigger than a man's arm. It darted up, held for perhaps ten seconds and then faded.

"The beam cannot spread?" I murmured to Raalt.

"No. Just a thin stab, like that one. After five hundred feet, I think it would do very little damage."

That at least was in our favor. It would not be easy to hit one of the fluttering birds, several hundred feet away, with that narrow beam. Nor to hold it on the shifting target so that its lethal effect would be felt.

I summoned Aurita now. My plan of battle was fairly clear in my mind. We would have to attack, of course. Without that,

the enemy boats would go on down the lake until they could assemble and bring their rays upon Dreen. There was a bottleneck in the lake a few miles beyond the turn—a narrow passage only two or three hundred feet wide, with the lake widening at both ends of its half mile length. The jungle pressed close to the edges of the narrow strait. When the boats got in there, particularly if we could get them bunched, that was our best time for attack.

I explained it to Aurita. With the boats clustered, we would have a far bigger target for the descending, whirling knife-blades.

She nodded eagerly.

"Yes, I understand. I will tell Jeena—and we will tell all of them."

"You are to keep out of range until the boats reach there," I directed. "And then—well, I'll give the signal. You'll see the volplane going down."

"Yes. Very well, Lee. I shall tell them."

"Look!" Raalt interjected. "One of the knives—"

A girl, from up here at our high altitude, had sent one of the blades descending. Shining, whirling little thing, its swift rotation making it look like a round blob. It skimmed down, like a boomerang in a big crescent arc, heading to one side and turning. The starlight glinted on it as it skimmed, fell.

It missed the leading boat by a hundred feet or more and fell with a little splash into the lake. In the heavy night-silence, the men's shouts of derision floated up to us.

"Tell the girls not to do that," I ordered sharply. "Just a waste of blades and we have not too many."

Aurita left us, her aerite winging away to join Jeena.

For another interval we hovered, high up. It would be nearly an hour perhaps before the boats reached that bottleneck strait. I presently called to Jeena as she passed, ordering the girls to wait here, to follow the boats. Then Raalt and I skimmed the volplane for Dreen. As though with a premonition ...

Certainly there was nothing now that we could do for Dreen, save to attack this oncoming enemy ...

We passed high over the little tree-top city, skimming in a great circle. Starlight was down there, and now the crescent Earth was rising, mellowing the forest-top with its yellow glow. Prone on the volplane, Raalt and I stared down.

Ghostly sight! On one of the swaying, bridge-like little streets, Nonites were running—pallid ghostly shapes, stained yellow by the Earthlight. Nonites with harvest tools, like swords glinting in the Earthshine.

I saw one of them reach a little thatched, moundshaped house, with the lounging platform before it. A woman huddled there—a woman in terror holding a little girl against her. The frenzied Nonite's sword flashed, with a cutting sweep as one would harvest grain in a field. Then it was a sword dripping with crimson as the woman fell.

The little girl, screaming, tried to run. With a pounce the Nonite seized her; whirled her; flung the child's body down through the foliage—little blob falling to the dark ground far underneath ...

Ghostly horror. In this little section of Dreen, the Nonites everywhere were running—hunting the terrified people in the houses; hurling them from bridges, from vine-ladders to which they were clinging.

In the silence the agonized screams floated up. Screams mingled now with other faint weird sounds, even more ghostly. The lusting voices of men filled with the frenzy of murder. Like vultures they were gathered down there on the dark ground. There was a place where for an instant we could see them—milling formless blobs of horror, eager for more victims for their swords.

We swept on. I saw another section where the young men of Dreen were fighting, groups of them lunging at the lustful,

now-murderous Nonites. Pressing the Nonites back, cutting through them, fighting their way forward ...

"Oh Lee, our home—look down there—my father—"

I had dropped the volplane lower. Close ahead of us, no more than a hundred feet down, the big dwelling of old Ptyah lay surrounded by its spreading tree-branches. Nonites were in the platform-garden in front—a group of Nonites standing waving their weapons, shouting at old Ptyah who had appeared in the doorway. Their Ruler, so that momentarily they were afraid to advance and could only stand their ground, brandishing their weapons while they hurled invectives.

It was just an instant glimpse as Raalt and I floated almost overhead. Then in that second, behind Ptyah in the doorway, Caroh appeared. Wily old Counsellor—the Nonites quite evidently now thought him their friend. A knife glinted in his hand as he jumped. Raalt and I both shouted at once; frantically we were fitting a blade into our slings.

But too late. Caroh's knife sank into Ptyah's back. He fell. My blade whirled down at almost the same instant. For that second I held my breath. By luck doubtless, my aim was true. The whirling blade struck Caroh's neck; he fell, with his head dangling askew.

All in a few ghastly seconds. Our platform swept past. Looking back we could see where the Nonites in Ptyah's garden now were being attacked by arriving men.

Poor Raalt for a moment, with that vision of his murdered father still before him, crouched numbed. There was nothing that I could say. Only with my hand on his shoulder could I let him know how I felt.

I headed us back up the lake. There was so little that we would have done, back there in Dreen. Our task lay ahead. I could only pray that the young men of the Forest People would beat off the Nonites. It seemed, that perhaps they would. And now, if this other enemy could be turned back ...

The girls, as I had commanded, were still circling at a thousand feet. And the first of the four boats, still in a line, was just entering the bottleneck strait. I called Aurita, warning Raalt not to tell her what we had seen in Dreen. Surely at least for now, I could spare her that.

"You take half the girls," I directed. "Twenty squads. Fly low in front of that first boat. They will think you are about to attack, and they may stop and wait for it. But keep well away—more than five hundred feet. Have Jeena, with the other girls, press toward the rear boat—try and drive it forward, you see?"

So that we might get them bunched in the bottleneck. Raalt and I held the volplane in the center as the girls divided, swept down in great fluttering arcs. It evidently startled the enemy. A few futile stabs of their rays darted at the descending girls. I could see the men at the sweeps in the first boat stop their efforts.

And then I swooped the volplane. The first attack.

We dropped downward, heading at the last boat. It increased its speed. Its ray stabbed at us as we came within range; missed, and then we were over it. A ray-beam came up, struck our bottom and for ten seconds clung. No great damage. There was the smell of chlorite gases; and the queer fetid odor of rotting wood.

In that swift swoop down and up again, Raalt and I hurled several of the whirling knives. Most of them missed, but one or two went into the rear boat. We saw one of the men fall, as the whirling blade cut into him. A confusion down there ...

Then we were up again out of range. The tactics had partially worked. The first boat had stopped; the last one, under the volplane's attack and with the squads of girls behind it, seeming about to swoop on it, had frantically hastened its advance. Almost in a little group, all within the space of a few hundred feet, the four boats were bunched in the bottleneck.

And then I gave the signal for the general attack. It started with a great flutter of the huge aerites' wings; grim shouts of the girls urging them forward and downward.

Awe-inspiring sight, that swoop into battle. But soon it was a thing of horror. Little squads of ten, they dipped down and up again, hurling their whirling knives at the bottom of the arc. Then the orange beams of the pencil rays were stabbing into them.

I shall never forget the sinking of my heart as I saw the first girl struck. She had avoided several of the stabs in her swoop, and had discharged her knife, at close range. But as she was rising, the narrow orange beam struck her, and for almost all its eternity of ten seconds, miraculously it clung. Ten seconds while the aerite fluttered. I had a vision of her there on its back, clinging ...

Suddenly a ghastly leprous vision—part of the bird and the girl's white-limbed body abruptly were melting. Ghastly, fused, leprous thing, bird and girl, rotted blob that in those seconds was falling, turning end over end until it struck the water with a little splash, mercifully to hide it.

And there were others. A ray that cut through a whole squad of ten, some falling, others with the bird flopping sidewise, struggling drunkenly with one wing. One or two others sagging down, flopping into the water. A girl down there, freed of her wounded bird, was swimming ...



The wind whistled past our ears as Raalt and I swooped the volplane. Lying prone on it, with our heads projecting a little, with our weapons ready for the bottom of our swooping arc, it was impossible to see much of what was going on. We hurled our knives into one of the crowded boats; I circled us low and we came back, hurled again; and again. The rays stabbed at us from underneath. The fumes of the chlorite gases and the rotting smell of the dissolving wood of our under-planks at times was choking. Would the rays dissolve through? Undoubtedly so, if enough of them struck in the same place.

But the hurled, whirling knife-blades were finding their marks. We had a glimpse of one of the boats, crowded with men, with a dozen or so of the little projectors mounted among them. There was confusion down there. Men hacked by the knives, falling among their comrades. Several of the projectors had been smashed as the men fell.

At the gunwales, the men with the long sweeps had given it up now. Some of the sweeps were floating overboard. The boat was drifting; the current in the bottleneck was carrying it toward the jungle-like bank.

Already that boat was in distress. We took another swoop at it and then rose. The end of the first attack.

Most of the girls were struggling up out of range now. My heart went cold. The girls were still trying to keep into squads. But they were broken; fifty girls at least were gone, out of our four hundred—leprous ghastly figures down in the water; others struggling in the air. One or two, with the girl perhaps realizing herself dying and her aerite unharmed, were winging back toward Dreen.

My anguished gaze sought Aurita—she was up here, safe; and so was Jeena. Both of them shouted at us as they fluttered past. They ignored any possible command from us. Again with the girls following them, they swooped.

The horror went on. A minute, five minutes, or even half an hour, I have no way of saying. Every passing moment seemed to bring an eternity of things terrible, indescribable.

One corner of our volplane had melted, rotted away now. Much more of that and the gravity-plates would be disorganized. Two of our rocket-streams were dead. As we rose from our swoops I could see more of the girls, wounded, struggling away. A dozen or more had wavered off and dropped into the nearby forest. Nonites were lurking there now, waiting for what might come to them ...

But we were making progress. Two of the boats had gone ashore. It seemed that in one, most of the men were strewn in a weltering mass. No shots were coming from it. On another boat, fire had broken out—one of the projectors, wrecked, had short-circuited, killing all the men near it. The others were struggling in chaos. The third boat was fighting, with the girls still swooping at it. The fourth was making away toward Dreen.

"We'll go after it, Raalt—"

"Yes," he agreed. "Oh Lee, look—over us—"

Several times girls had come to us to get more of the knife-blades. We had no more than twenty or thirty left here. And suddenly now a wounded aerite was fluttering—an aerite and girl. Then the bird, with one of its wings gone, wavered sidewise and the girl dropped off, fell six or eight feet and landed beside us.

Jeena ...

Raalt gave an agonized cry and threw himself down to hold her. Poor little Jeena. An arm, and one of her legs seared ... She lay pallid in Raalt's arms, just barely conscious but still she was trying to smile as she gazed up at him.

"We—we're winning, Raalt?"

"Yes—yes, of course, Jeena dear—"

I hurled the volplane at that escaping boat. Its open interior was a welter; more than half of its men lying strewn. The others were manning the sweeps, frantically urging it forward. It seemed to have only one projector still in action. A big man was standing there in the stern with it, training it on us.

Torm! The starlight, Earthlight and the flames from the burning boat illumined him. His blood-smeared face was grinning. I poised us, ready for the final swoop.

Then over us there was a flutter. Aurita dropped beside us, and her wounded mount wavered away. Aurita, thank God, still unharmed.

"I need some knives," she gasped. "I can call another aerite."

"We haven't any knives to spare." I gripped her. How could I be blamed that now I could not let her start off again into that turmoil of death, by trick of fate so much more dangerous for her, than for me, here protected by the volplane planks.

"You stay here," I said. "We've got them beaten, by God we have."

Her strained white face went into a twisted grin.

"Yes, we have."

One of the wrecked boats was jammed against the shore. I glanced back. The girls had ceased their attack now; what was left of them had struggled up and were poised overhead.

"Jeena needs you," I murmured to Aurita. She had not seen Jeena. With a little cry she threw herself down; and Raalt came to lie beside me.

And then we swooped at Torm.

Skimming low over the water, I slid the volplane directly at him. There was a second when his orange beam sizzled close over our heads. Then Raalt's hurled blade went into his side and mine seemed to strike his throat where his lusting, murderous blood spurted in a crimson torrent.

The volplane swept close over him. Then we turned to look back. He had fallen. Then with a last desperate frenzy he staggered erect. His smashed projector was darting flames of electronic fire at him. For an instant he poised on the gunwale, gazing at us with an arm waving as though still trying to hurl defiance. Then his body pitched overboard. There was a splash. A monstrous rotting thing in the water for an instant. And then there was nothing ...

Aftermath of battle. Return of the victorious army. As my mind goes back to it now, really I have little heart to describe it—that pitiful little army slowly winging its way back to Dreen. In war, even the victor is vanquished. How true that is! Broken little army, to struggle back now and celebrate its victory. We were able to rescue a few of the girls, but even so, a scant hundred and fifty were left to realize that they had won.

Nor need I describe with any detail what since has happened to me here in Dreen. The rebellion of the Nonites was checked by the young men of the Forest People, that terrible night. The Nonites realize now how they were tricked.

Jeena recovered from her injuries. Fortunately the ray had held her only a second, and her skin only seared by its dissolving qualities. In a few months—for she was a long time recovering from the shock—she was wholly well, and more beautiful than ever. Perhaps more beautiful even than Aurita, but I will never admit it fully. She and Raalt are very happy; married now.

Aurita and I, too, are mated. With Raalt we rule Dreen. A new era is dawning for us all, we hope. Our ray-weapons have been destroyed; the Nonites now are our equals, happy as we. Food is more abundant; soon we hope that we can build cities on the ground. A new era. I wonder if that really is progress toward human happiness...?

I have written this narrative; I shall try now to wait my chance, and launch a little cylinder I have built, hoping that some time this may reach Earth, so that my dear grandparents may understand the mystery of me. I hope they forgive me. It is all for the best. Surely this will show that my very strange destiny brought me here, and I am happy ...

LEE BLAINE.

Dr. Robert Blaine, astronomer, looked up from the tiny flames of the embering log in the fireplace.

"He is happy, Mary," he whispered. "We would not have him return, would we?"

His wife picked up the crystal that mirrored Lee Blaine's smiling face and looked into it fondly.

"No," she said softly. "He has a perfect world there—and he will make of it what mankind has failed to make here on Earth ..."

Reflectively Dr. Blaine picked up the other crystal. As he looked into its depths and into the flashing, laughing eyes of Aurita, the Druid girl of Zonara, his fingers reached out and took the sheaf of maps and mathematical calculations that proved the existence and location of Earth's second moon. For a moment he fingered them, then he tossed them atop the glowing log.

"Robert," Mary Blaine said. "What are you doing ..?"

Dr. Blaine handed her the crystal in his hand.

"Look," he said softly. "Do you think an old man like me can place such a fleeting thing as personal vindication for a discovery before her happiness and Lee's? It is better that the newspapers laugh at me. Better that mankind does not believe Zonara exists; so that Lee and Aurita can keep their paradise. Then we will have the last laugh, eh, darling?"

She placed a hand on his white head and ran her fingers fondly through his hair.

"Yes, Robert," she said softly. "We will."

And they both watched while the flames licked away the last trace of proof that 440,000 miles away in space was a world where man's hate had been obliterated.

The existence of a second satellite has long been a question of debate by astronomers. Certain perturbations in the orbit of Luna, and in the astronomical time calculations based on this body have led to the suspicion that somewhere in space a small body exists, or did exist, which also circled the Earth as a satellite. However, today, it is not thought that there is such a moon, in any size

worthy of mention as a satellite. Yet, astronomers feel sure that at one time in Earth's past, a second, and quite large moon did exist, and was destroyed by some catastrophe, possibly by a wandering asteroid, like Eros, which approached very near the Earth recently, to within some 3,000,000 miles.

In the Carolinas there are a series of meteoric craters, discovered by aerial photography, which indicate that the fragments of a large stellar body smashed down there in the dim past. Was it the second moon of Earth, falling in fragments, that gouged out these craters? Possibly, say astronomers. They may be able to prove it someday, when computations now being made are completed. As to the present existence of a second moon, they only shrug. It could be so, they admit.—ED.

Obviously these crystals, like photographic film, are sensitive to light, and when exposed to it, undergo a chemical change which fixes the light rays in their depths, so that the scene they mirror upon first exposure is retained permanently in their interiors, and is visible, from all angles through their many facets. The uncanny crystals therefore, present, at one and the same time, a three dimensional photograph of the scene impressed in them from all sides, and can be so viewed by simply looking through the different facets.—ED.

Flying knives—a naked handle-less curved blade shaped like a boomerang, about a foot long. It is double-edged, pointed at both ends. The blade is hurled by a little sling, rotating, and is used mainly to kill tree-reptiles and to cut down birds of prey in the forest which served as human food. The Virgins are all adept with them.—ED.

Aerites—giant birds, brown and white with great green wings, spreading a full fifteen feet. Almost like a hawk, with strange huge-beaked head and sharp, pointed ears. However, they are really gentle creatures of the forest-top. At Dreen, Aurita's city, many of them are domesticated. They have at least the intelligence of an Earth dog—the same obedience and willing loyalty. The young Virgins of Dreen, weighing what on Earth would be no more than twenty pounds, often ride the aerites. But the men, more than twice as heavy, could not be carried by the willing birds.—ED.

Red-storm—On Zonara electrical storms are different than on Earth. The quality of the atmosphere makes the lightning flare brilliant crimson, possibly because of a high neon content, and the chemicals that make for red in the electrical discharge. These storms are quite violent, and whip up terrifying winds that rise and die with devastating suddenness. The spectacle of a red-storm in full sway is a magnificent, though terrible one. The heavens are a continual flare of rolling, blood-red, moiling with scudding clouds. And the thunder, too, is a particularly ear-piercing, crackling kind.—ED.

[The end of *Onslaught of the Druid Girls* by Ray Cummings]